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Weaver Slough/Foys Bend & Ringneck Ranch Wetland Conservation Projects

Draft Environmental Assessment

February 2004

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Weaver Slough/Foys Bend and Ringneck Ranch Wetland Conservation Projects

Draft Environmental Assessment

Public Comment Period:

February 19 through March 19, 2004

Public Hearings:

Monday, March 15, 2004, Ninepipes Lodge, Hwy 93 South, Ronan MT, at 6:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 16, 2004, Somers Middle School, 315 School Addition Rd., Somers, MT, at 7:00 p.m.

Address Comments to:

Gael Bissell
Habitat Conservation Biologist
490 N. Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

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Weaver Slough/Foys Bend and Ringneck Ranch Conservation Projects

Draft Environmental Assessment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Weaver Slough/Foys Bend and Ringneck Ranch projects are Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Region One's top priority wetland conservation projects for 2004. FWP proposes to assist the Flathead Land Trust in the purchase of a conservation easement on two parcels of land totaling 685 acres. One parcel is located in the interior of Weaver Slough (T27N, R21W, in portions of Sections 1, 2, 11, & 12, Flathead County). The Foys Bend parcel (T28N, R21W, S27, Flathead County) is located along the main stem of the Flathead River just south of Kalispell. The proposed project also includes the purchase in fee of up to 200 acres of land on the Ringneck Ranch (SW¼ of SW¼ of S4, T19N, R20W, Lake County) adjoining the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area in the Mission Valley.

The Weaver Slough/Foys Bend conservation easement project would be funded primarily using the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grants and $180,000 in Montana Migratory Bird Stamp funds. The U. S. Department of Agriculture is also contributing Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program funds. The Flathead Land Trust is a local land trust based in Kalispell; this organization would be the primary conservation easement holder and would monitor the conservation easement on the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend portion of the project. The NAWCA funds would also be the source of funding for FWP's purchase in fee of the Ringneck Ranch property. This land would be managed as part of the state's Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area.

A copy of the draft EA can be obtained on the FWP website: www.fwp.state.mt.us; go to Public Notices; under this, select Environmental Assessments. Copies will be also located at the Flathead County Library in Kalispell and the Polson City Library in Polson, and in the FWP Region One office, 490 N. Meridian Road, Kalispell. A copy can be requested by contacting Nancy Ivy, (406) 751-4579 or nivy@state.mt.us.

Public hearings will be held at the Ninepipes Lodge (Allentown), Monday, March 15, 2004, at 7:00 p.m., and at the Somers Middle School, 315 School Addition Road, Somers, Tuesday, March 16, 2004.

Please direct questions and comments to Gael Bissell, Habitat Conservation Biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 490 N. Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 59901, (406) 751-4580 or e-mail gbissell@state.mt.us. Questions and comments must be received by Friday, March 19, 2004.

INTRODUCTION

Overview

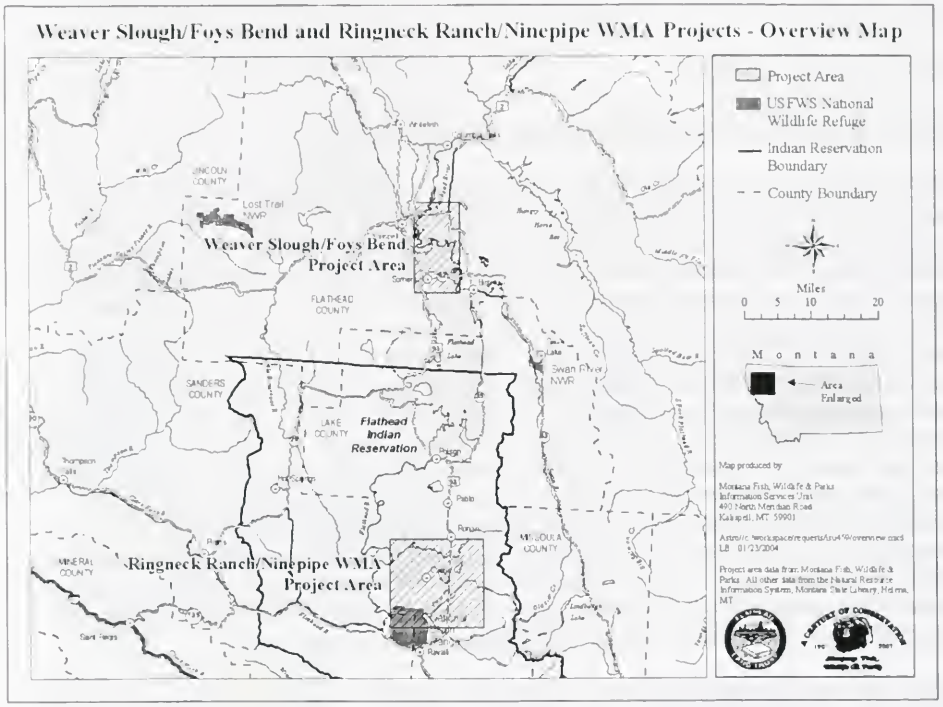
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to assist in the purchase of a conservation easement on approximately 685 acres of land (part of a 1,052-acre conservation easement project) in the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend project area located between Flathead Lake and Kalispell and to purchase in fee up to 200 acres of land on the Ringneck Ranch adjoining the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area in the Mission Valley (Fig. 1). The Weaver Slough/Foys Bend project would be funded primarily using the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grants, a U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program grant, and $180,000 in Montana Migratory Bird Stamp funds. The Flathead Land Trust is a local land trust based in Kalispell; this organization would be the primary conservation easement holder. They would also monitor the conservation easement on the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend portion of the project. The NAWCA funds would also be the source of funding for FWP's purchase in fee of the Ringneck Ranch property. This land would be managed as part of the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area.

Background

The Weaver Slough/Foys Bend and Ringneck Ranch projects are the Region's top priority wetland conservation projects. The Flathead Land Trust linked these projects through an application for a standard North American Wetland Conservation Act (NAWCA) grant for approximately $929,000 prepared on behalf of the Glaciated Valleys of Northwest Montana partnership, a group of public and private entities working in both the Flathead and Mission Valleys on wetland conservation. The FLT has already received approval for a small or $50,000 NAWCA grant to be used on the Weaver Slough portion of the project. The FLT submitted the standard NAWCA application to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in July 2002 and resubmitted it in March and July 2003. Standard NAWCA grants are awarded on a nationally competitive basis. The Weaver Slough/Foys Bend and Ringneck Ranch proposals are currently ranked 3rd in the nation and were approved by the North American Wetland Conservation Council in December 2003. The Migratory Bird Conservation Commission will make final approvals of the NAWCA grants in early March 2004.

Both the Flathead and Mission Valleys contain important riparian/wetlands along a major migratory flyway and are under pressure of subdivision and development. The private landowners in both the north and south project areas would like to work with the Flathead Land Trust and FWP to complete conservation of their lands.

Fig. 1. Location of the Glaciated Valleys Proposed North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) proposal, July 2003.



FWP proposes to use the $180,000 in Montana Migratory Bird Stamp program funds to assist in the purchase of a conservation easement on 2 parcels in the Flathead Valley and as a state match to the NAWCA funds to be used in both the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend and Ringneck Ranch projects. The Weaver Slough project proposal was submitted to FWP's Wetland Protection Advisory Council in the spring of 2001; the Council gave a favorable review to the project at that time and supported the project at the FWP Commission meeting on January 24, 2002, where the Commission gave preliminary approval for FWP to proceed on the project. FWP has set aside $60,000 in Waterfowl Stamp funds for the last 3 years to provide potential funding for the project.

Other funding sources that have been used to purchase conservation easements from these and other landowners in the larger Weaver Slough/Foys Bend project area include USDA Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, Montana Agricultural Heritage Program, and the Bonneville Power Administration fisheries mitigation program.

The proposed Ringneck Ranch project was presented to the FWP Commission in May 2003; the Commission provided tentative approval for acquisition using the NAWCA funds at that time. The value of FWP's previous purchase of the Palmer and Pheasants Forever properties (using Montana Migratory Bird Stamp funds in 2001 and 2003, respectively) adjoining the Ninepipe WMA will be used as a match to the NAWCA funds.

Purpose and Need

Weaver Slough/Foys Bend Project Area (Flathead Valley)

FWP initiated work with private landowners in the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend area in the early 1980s as part of the wildlife and habitat studies associated with Kerr and Hungry Horse Dams. From these studies, it became clear that the oxbow lakes and sloughs along the lower Flathead River south of Kalispell held exceptional wetland and riparian complexes important to a diversity of wildlife from semi-aquatic furbearers such as river otter and beaver, to nesting and migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, colonial nesting birds, upland game birds, raptors, white-tailed deer, and grizzly bears. FWP has worked since 1996 with several landowners and partners to bring together funding for the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend portion of this project (Figs. 2 and 3). Not only are the private wetland complexes important for wildlife, but also the farmlands in this area are also important for wildlife by providing seasonal grain food sources, nesting habitat along field edges and irrigation lines, and open space. These soils rank as "prime agricultural soils" and are characterized as some of the most productive soils in Montana. Historical uses of the land include farming, but now growth in the Flathead Valley is competing for prime farmlands. Several landowners in the project area have already been awarded the statewide competitive Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program funds for farmland conservation easements.

Since 1996, the partners have made significant progress in the valley. Area land trusts have acquired conservation easements on over 2,000 acres along the Flathead River and associated sloughs (Fig. 3). As of February 2004, two land trusts hold conservation easements on approximately 800 acres in the Weaver Slough project area (Fig. 3). The final phase of this project is the purchase of a conservation easement on the remaining Weaver Slough farm and wetlands (449 acres) and on 236 acres of riparian/wetlands and farmland at Foys Bend from one landowner, using a combination of Montana Migratory Bird Stamp and NAWCA funds.

Figure 2. Location of the Weaver Slough and Foys Bend Project Area, Flathead Valley, Montana.

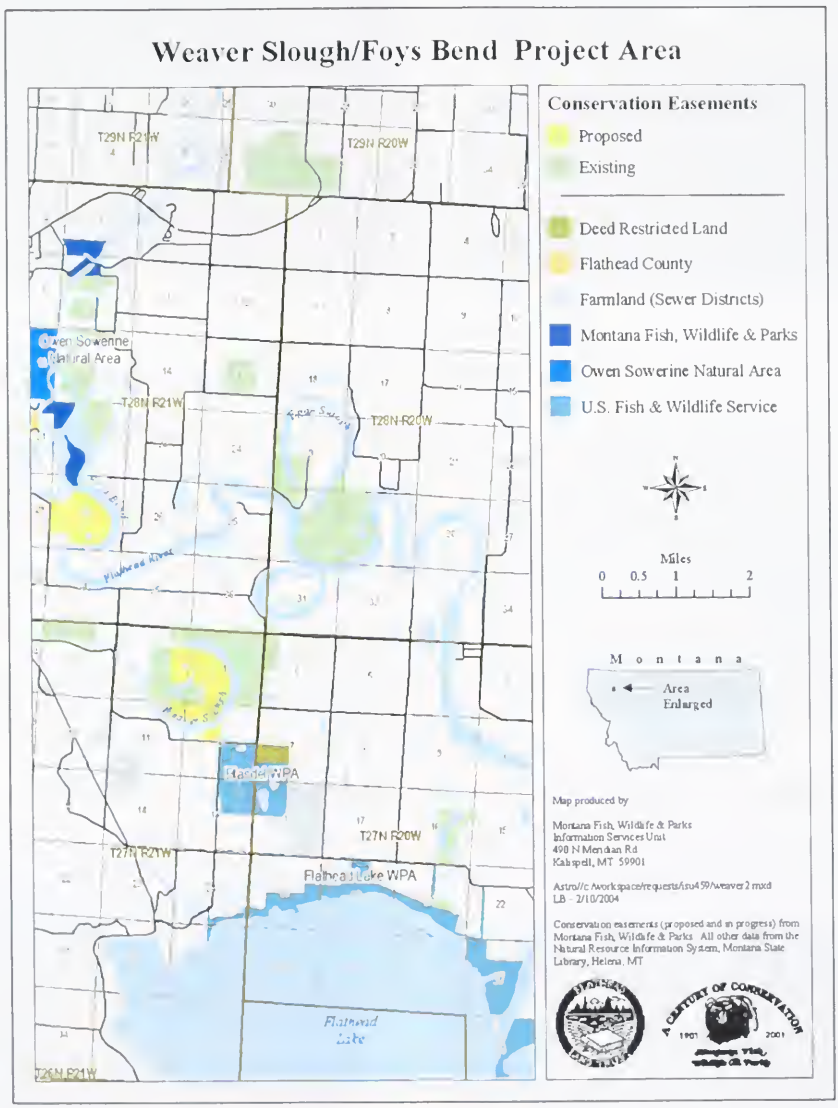
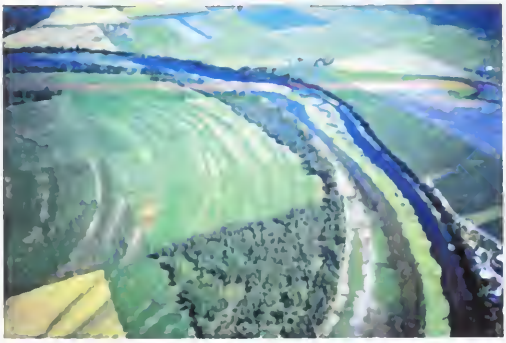


Fig. 3. Photo on left looking over the northeast corner of Weaver Slough; photo on right overview of Foys Bend Property, Flathead Valley, MT.



Ringneck Ranch - Ninepipe WMA Addition (Mission Valley)

This 200-acre property immediately adjoins a portion of the Ninepipe WMA located in the Mission Valley, Lake County, Montana, and on the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) Indian Reservation. The Ninepipe WMA lies within a high-priority area identified in the Five Valleys Prairie Pothole Joint Venture of the North American Waterfowl Plan and the recent Glaciated Valleys NAWCA application. The Five Valleys plan identified high-quality waterfowl production habitats in northwestern Montana. This area lies within a priority wetland and wildlife restoration program for the CSKT. The Ringneck property is situated amid a complex of tribal, state, and federally managed wildlife habitat protection sites in the Mission Valley that contain a highly unique prairie pothole wetland complex containing thousands of small pothole wetlands (Fig. 3). An aerial photo is included in the appendices. The 200-acre addition would greatly enhance these ongoing conservation efforts.

Fig. 4. View of wetlands on the Ringneck Ranch near Ninepipe WMA, Mission Valley, MT.

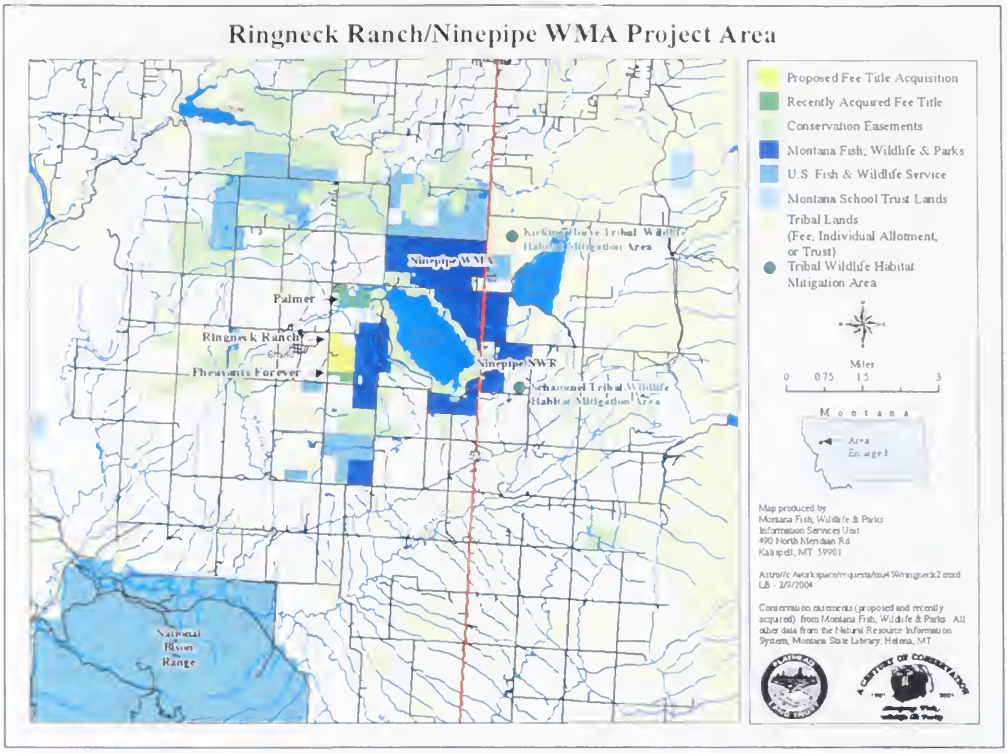


Fig. 5. Location of Ringneck Ranch and other conservation lands, Mission Valley, Lake County, MT.

FWP along with many other entities has helped conserve the prairie pothole ecosystem by enhancing the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area since the early 1950s. This pothole region area comprises about 13,000 acres and lies north of the National Bison Range (Fig. 2). FWP's Ninepipe WMA lies in the heart of this pothole complex and surrounds the Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge. It adjoins several federal waterfowl production areas, private lands with conservation easements held by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and several Tribal wildlife habitat mitigation areas managed by the CSKT for their wetland and wildlife values (Fig. 5). This area is also important to breeding and migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, amphibians and reptiles, and grizzly bears. The Ninepipe WMA also provides a significant amount of public recreational opportunities. The sporting public from Missoula, Lake, and Flathead Counties need and support increased public waterfowl and upland game bird hunting opportunities. The landowners of the Ringneck Ranch would like to sell their land to FWP because it

adjoins the WMA, including the recently acquired Pheasants Forever property (FWP completed in 2003). This 200-acre parcel also contains numerous seasonal or permanent wetlands as well as 5 potentially restorable wetlands that were drained or filled previously. The property is also part of the Ninepipe and Pablo irrigation project. The rest of the property consists of irrigated hay and croplands that have been used for agricultural and wildlife values. This acquisition is important because one of the landowners plans to liquidate their portion of this asset immediately. If not purchased for conservation, the south portion of the 200 acres will immediately be sold. The remaining landowners are willing to work with FWP and various funding sources over a reasonable time period to complete a sale to FWP.

DETAILED PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

Weaver Slough/Foys Bend (Conservation Easements)

Habitat Values: Weaver Slough is one of 7 major oxbow lakes or sloughs formed by the Flathead River. This slough is fed by natural springs, Ashley Creek, and the Flathead River, which backs up into the Lower Valley during the summer as a result of Kerr Dam operations. This large horseshoe-shaped slough in total comprises about 200 acres of open water/submergent habitat type, 30 acres of pond/emergent vegetation, and 80 acres of riparian shrub and forest, along with 460 acres of farmland. The Weaver Slough portion of the project includes 449 acres of the interior "island" surrounded by the slough that is approximately a mile in diameter. There are no structures within the "island" part of Weaver Slough. The slough attracts migratory and resident waterfowl, including mallards, American widgeon, gadwall, northern pintail, red-necked ducks, canvasbacks, northern shovelers, all species of mergansers and teal, greater scaup, Canada geese, and tundra swans. A trumpeter swan was also located on the slough for several weeks in the spring of 2002. The slough is also used by raptors such as bald eagles, hawks, and northern harriers; water birds such as great blue herons, sora, American bittern, and common sandpipers; painted turtles; neotropical migrants; and upland game birds such as wild turkey and pheasants.

The 236-acre Foys Bend portion of the project lies along the inside of a major bend in the Flathead River just south of the "braided section" of the Flathead near Kalispell. Foys Bend property is also just south of three Flathead River wildlife habitat protection areas. This property contains another 33 acres of pond and 70 acres of riparian habitats and provides added continuity to one of the most productive island complexes in the Flathead. The Foys Bend property also contains one of the oldest active bald eagle nests along the Flathead River. Over 100 bird species occur on the Owen Sowerwine Natural Area, located between the Flathead and Stillwater Rivers just north of Foys Bend (Fig. 2 and Appendix B). The cottonwood and riparian grass/shrub and wetland habitats on the Owen Sowerwine are similar to the Foys Bend and Weaver Slough project areas.

Location/Ownership: The Weaver Slough portion of the project, where the Flathead Land Trust is purchasing conservation easements using a combination of Montana Migratory Bird Stamp and NAWCA funds, includes 173 acres of riparian/wetlands and 276 (total of 449) acres of farmland located within the interior of Weaver Slough in Sections 1,2,11, and 12 of Township 27N, Range 21W, in Flathead County. The Foys Bend portion of the conservation easement purchase will use Montana Migratory Bird and NAWCA funds and comprises 236 acres (133 acres of farmland and 103 acres of riparian/wetlands) in Section 27 of Township 28N, Range 21W, a few miles north of Weaver Slough (Fig. 2). In both projects, the landowners are selling the conservation easements below market value.

Costs/Funding Sources: The proposed purchase price for the conservation easement on 449 acres at Weaver Slough will be below the estimated market value as substantiated by a federal standard appraisal for the landowner. The purchase price is $2,000/acre for a total of $898,000. FWP would provide approximately $106,400 in Montana Migratory Bird Stamp funds, with the balance coming from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service NAWCA and U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm and Ranch Lands Protection funds for this portion of the proposed project. This purchase value is well below estimated market value for the conservation easement appraised at approximately $3,000/acre. The bargain sale value would be used to match different portions of the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program and NAWCA grants.

The Foys Bend portion of the proposed conservation easement project on 236 acres would also be a bargain sale for $1500/acre for a total of $354,000. Approximately $73,600 would come from the Montana Migratory Bird Stamp with the balance coming from NAWCA funds. FWP's total contribution to the conservation easement purchase price is approximately 14.4% of total cost for the easement on both parcels.

Conservation Easement Terms: FWP would hold a second interest in the conservation easement project, much like the other funding entities. The terms of the conservation easement would prohibit development or subdivision of any of these lands (except for two building envelopes outside the slough on one parcel), mining, industrial activities, and most commercial uses except those associated with agriculture or agricultural products. It would also restrict activities that would significantly impact the riparian/wetland vegetation and values. The conservation easement also requires the landowner to complete a farm conservation or "management" plan to ensure farming practices comply with Best Management Practices and minimizes impacts to water quality and other habitat values. Although these lands are currently available for hunting, the conservation easement does not require public access. It does ensure that the land will remain in large tract ownership with intact habitats that will continue to produce wildlife. Both areas are located close to areas open for public hunting. Blasdel Waterfowl Production Area lies just to the south of Weaver Slough; portions of the Flathead River Wildlife Habitat Protection Area are located just north of Foys Bend.

Threatened or Endangered Species and Species of Special Concern: One of the upper Flathead River's oldest and most productive bald eagle nests (active since at least 1984) is located on the Foys Bend property. The Foys Bend property is also very

important to the maintenance and recovery of bull trout and west slope cutthroat trout. Results of a radiotelemetry study conducted by FWP revealed a concentration of fish in the main stem Flathead River associated with the Foys Bend property. Bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout likely occupy these areas to maximize energy conservation, and use cover to evade predation or avoid high light intensities. Protection of 1.5 miles of shoreline along the west bank in the Foys Bend area will protect important over-wintering habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, directly contributing to the production of an estimated 25 adult bull trout each year.

Other species using the project area include common loons and trumpeter swans, species of special concern. Common loons frequently use the main stem Flathead River in the fall and spring during their migration to and from the west coast. Trumpeter swans occasionally migrate to the Flathead River oxbow lakes and sloughs during the spring and fall. One unmarked trumpeter was observed on Weaver Slough for several weeks in May 2002. Trumpeter Swans are a focus of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' native species restoration efforts and could eventually extend their range throughout the Flathead basin if the project is successful.

Grizzly bears frequent the major riparian complexes along the Flathead River in the spring and fall. Last summer a young grizzly bear moved frequently through the Foys Bend, Egan Slough, and braided sections of the river. An adult male grizzly bear also moved from the Swan Valley into other major sloughs and wetlands last summer, only a few miles from Foys Bend and Weaver Slough. The lush spring vegetation and native chokecherry and hawthorn berries appear to be the main attractants.

Management Approach: Land management activities such as weed control, fencing, and seeding/haying would continue to be the responsibility of the landowner. These activities would follow the current farmland management plan required by the Flathead Land Trust. The Flathead Land Trust would hold and monitor the conservation easement.

Ringneck Ranch/Mission Valley Project

Habitat/Recreation Values: FWP proposes to acquire the Ringneck Ranch in fee for the purpose of preserving and enhancing habitat for a variety of wildlife and to provide recreational hunting opportunities. The Ninepipe WMA provides the most significant waterfowl nesting (Appendix C, waterfowl banding results) and ring-necked pheasant habitat in northwestern Montana. This productive upland habitat also supports other wildlife species, including trumpeter swans, owls, and other raptors, including bald eagles and peregrine falcons, sandhill cranes, shore birds, songbirds (Appendix D), small mammals, and reptiles and amphibians. The Ninepipe wetland complexes are in the midst of a trumpeter swan reintroduction effort spearheaded by the Tribes. The general area supports one of the highest-recorded densities of nesting short-eared owls and northern harriers. Winter concentrations of rough-legged hawks and other raptor species rival other similar habitat types throughout North America.

There are numerous opportunities to improve or create waterfowl nesting and pheasant habitat on this property following acquisition. The Ringneck Ranch property contains at least 9 existing pothole wetlands comprising 8 acres as well as an estimated 5 restorable wetlands comprising another 15-20 acres. The wetland habitats would be evaluated and restored and/or enhanced by FWP following an inventory planned for all FWP lands in the Ninepipe WMA. FWP could also partner with Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, or other organizations to aid in that restoration/enhancement effort.

FWP would acquire all water rights and pay annual irrigation fees. Water is available from the irrigation project adjoining the WPA. The acquired lands would become part of the Ninepipe WMA and would be managed for wildlife as well as for public recreation associated with the wildlife populations. Ninepipe WMA supports very high hunter densities, and crowding concerns are an issue during hunting seasons. This area offers some of the best public waterfowl and upland bird hunting access in western Montana. Recreational opportunity for waterfowl and upland bird hunters would increase following acquisition (Appendix E).

Location/Ownership: Currently, several landowners jointly own the Ringneck Ranch. The property has been used for agriculture and private hunting for many years. The property is located directly north of the Pheasants Forever property purchased in 2003. The Ringneck land is located in the southwest quarter of the southwest quarter of Section 4, Township 19N, Range 20W, less Tract 1 of Certificate of Survey 5870. FWP would acquire all water rights associated with this property. There are at least 8 old farm-related buildings of no value on the property. Pheasants Forever will assist the current landowners in their removal prior to FWP acquiring the property.

Costs/Funding Sources: An appraisal that meets federal appraisal standards is scheduled for the Ringneck Ranch.

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes: Because the property is located on the Flathead Indian Reservation, FWP contacted the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' (CSKT) Tribal Fish and Wildlife Program personnel to give them an opportunity to purchase this property if it meets habitat program objectives. The CSKT Tribal Fish and Wildlife Program personnel decided to not pursue this acquisition and informed FWP of their decision.

Threatened or Endangered Species and Species of Special Concern: Trumpeter swans, considered a species of special concern in Montana and the focus of the CSKT restoration efforts, will likely utilize the property following wetland area enhancement. Approximately 20 trumpeter swans were released in the Mission Valley in 2003, and 30 were released two years ago. Grizzly bears have also been observed near the property on WMA lands in years past.

Management Approach: Land management activities such as weed control, fencing, and seeding/haying would follow the overall draft management plan for Ninepipe WMA and the attached interim management plan for Ringneck Ranch. Short-term management activities would include managing weeds through spot spraying, haying,

clipping, and pulling. FWP would also maintain the current water delivery system. Other management objectives would include wetland restoration and establishment of dense nesting cover and food plots on farm lands. Grain farming and haying by sharecroppers, management tools used on adjacent WMA lands, would potentially occur on portions of the Ringneck Ranch property.

Day-to-day management and operations costs would be incorporated into the current operations management program and budget at Ninepipe WMA. County roads border the west and north sides of the Ringneck Ranch and should provide ample public access for waterfowl and upland bird hunters and also for wildlife-viewing opportunities. After purchase, FWP estimates that the land would be used by a minimum of 60 people on opening day of pheasant season. Overall, we estimate the land could generate 100-200 additional hunter-days annually.

Hiking, birdwatching, photography, dog training, and nature study are becoming increasingly popular and would all occur on this property. Some form of wildlife-oriented recreation occurs on the Ninepipe WMA every day of the year, and this level of use is expected to occur on the Ringneck property as well. This property offers excellent birdwatching for waterfowl, raptors, and other birds. About 100 nonhunting recreational days per year would probably occur.

Tax revenues collected by Lake County are not expected to change substantially. FWP would make cash payments in lieu of taxes to Lake County that would approximate the rate paid by a private landowner. Prior to sale, the landowner may remove some of the older structures on the property. Two storage structures are needed for WMA management (and may be retained by FWP).

The economic value of this land for wildlife-related recreation and public expenditures to local merchants during the hunting seasons is high. We currently have private sector support from the Pheasants Forever Chapter in the Mission Valley, Big Sky Upland Bird Association in Missoula, the Mission Valley chapter of Ducks Unlimited, and Polson Outdoors Incorporated.

No public recreational opportunities have been available on the property historically. Ringneck Ranch used the property for private hunting. By dispersing public pheasant hunting pressure throughout Ninepipe WMA, the quality of recreational experience for all hunters in the area would be enhanced if these 200 acres were added to the WMA.

DISCUSSION OF ALTERNATIVES

Alternative A – Proposed Action: Complete Conservation Easement and Fee Title Acquisition

Under this alternative, FWP would complete the proposed projects described in this document. The actions would result in conservation of 685 acres of riparian/wetlands and farmlands in the interior of Weaver Slough and Foys Bend. This project would keep the land in private ownership and the farmland portions in farmland production. Current income and property taxes would not be affected. The land could not be subdivided or developed, and the riparian/wetlands could not be altered, drained, cleared, or reduced in any manner.

This portion of the project would complete the last phase of a 2000-acre conservation effort in the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend project area. The project would use $180,000 in Montana Migratory Bird Stamp funds that were set aside for the project beginning in 2000 (following preliminary approval to proceed by the FWP Commission) and are available for the project at this time. It would also utilize our pledged "match" of the Pheasants Forever and Palmer properties and maintain Migratory Bird Stamp funds to obtain use of the NAWCA funds for both projects.

FWP would also acquire the 200-acre Ringneck Ranch property located adjacent to the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area. Through fee-title ownership, FWP would have the opportunity to restore and enhance wetlands and uplands, and expand recreational opportunities for the public. FWP would manage weeds, provide public access areas, and pay in-lieu-of taxes similar to the real estate property taxes paid by previous landowners for the land. The current property has several outbuildings and a home. Two of these structures will be retained and maintained by FWP. The others will be removed or moved to another site by the landowners before transfer to FWP.

Alternative A complements FWP's management efforts at Ninepipe WMA to produce and maintain habitats for a variety of wildlife and for a variety of compatible public uses. Alternative A would allow FWP to implement management strategies and management activities on the property that have been successfully employed on the adjacent Ninepipe WMA. This alternative would result in significant increases in production of and seasonal use by ducks, geese, and pheasants, thereby creating an estimated 100-200 additional hunter days of recreation each year.

Alternative B – No Action

FWP would forego its role in helping the Flathead Land Trust acquire conservation easements at Weaver Slough and Foys Bend. This action would limit the Flathead Land Trust's use of available NAWCA funds and would reduce or eliminate all of the final phase of the Weaver Slough project. This would severely impact the Weaver Slough project integrity, negatively affect future land trust conservation efforts, and probably impact the Glaciated Valleys partnership's ability to utilize current as well as future NAWCA funds.

Under this scenario, current wildlife values related to the land and the ongoing agricultural practices could not be assured into the future. FWP would also forego this opportunity to purchase the 200-acre Ringneck Ranch property affecting both habitat and recreational opportunities. It would also likely result in one of the current landowners developing their share of the property; the remaining landowners could sell the remainder with or without some type of land protection.

Alternative C – Completing Only a Portion of the Proposed Action

Under this alternative, FWP would either partner with the Flathead Land Trust to purchase the proposed conservation easements or purchase the Ringneck Ranch in fee, but not do both projects. If FWP partnered with the Flathead Land Trust but did not complete the fee acquisition, then the benefits of this purchase in the Mission Valley would not occur. Habitat improvements and public access on Ringneck Ranch would not be secured. Remaining NAWCA funds would probably be spent elsewhere in the Glaciated Valleys. FWP's contribution match to obtain the NAWCA (Palmer and Montana Migratory Bird Stamp funds) would be utilized without FWP acquiring any additional lands for wildlife management.

If FWP did not assist in completion of the conservation easement portion of the project, but accepted the purchase of Ringneck Ranch using NAWCA funds, then the benefits of the conservation easement portion would not be realized. However, failure to use the $180,000 in state funds on the conservation easement would jeopardize at least $90,000 in NAWCA funds, putting the last phase of Weaver Slough and/or the Ringneck Ranch purchase in jeopardy. Weaver Slough is the Region's highest priority wetland project, and this project would probably not get completed.

For the purpose of this draft EA, the impacts of this alternative are assumed to range between the proposed and no-action alternatives and, therefore, are not described in detail.

ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

This section of the environmental assessment presents an evaluation of the impacts of the alternatives, including secondary and cumulative impacts on the physical and human environment.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Land Resources:

Alternative A (Proposed Action): Under the proposed action alternative, current agricultural land uses would continue in a similar manner at Weaver Slough/Foys Bend. These landowners would comply with their updated farmland management plans produced with the assistance of the Natural Resources Conservation Service to ensure conservation of soil and water resources. Soil productivity, quantity and quality would be maintained or improved. Riparian/wetland soils would not be disturbed, filled, or otherwise altered in the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend project area as these activities are restricted by the conservation easement.

For the Ringneck Ranch addition, agricultural uses may continue similar to previous activities except the goal of those operations would be to enhance wildlife and habitat values. Lands may continue to be cultivated for weed control or planted to nesting cover and food crops. Nest cover areas would likely be hayed after the nesting season to maintain vigor and control weeds. Wetlands could be enhanced or restored through plugging of drains, ditches, or other outlets, or through excavation. Wetland soils and plants would be reestablished in the restored wetlands. Soils on-site may have to be disturbed during this restoration process. A wetland restoration plan would be developed and covered by a separate environmental analysis.

Alternative B (No Action): Under the no-action alternative, both the Weaver Slough and the Ringneck Ranch could be eventually subdivided and/or developed for residential or commercial uses. The important farmland soils and riparian/wetland resources in both projects could be impacted through direct construction of roads and buildings and through filling of wetlands. New land uses could also reduce soil productivity through overgrazing and weeds.

Air Quality:

Alternative A (Proposed Action): Under the proposed action, land uses would primarily be agricultural or habitat. Other than short-term dust effects that could occur with ongoing agricultural activities on the conservation easement lands or temporary soils disturbances associated with restoration of upland or wetland habitats on the Ringneck Ranch lands, no activities would occur that could negatively affect future long-term air quality of this area.

Alternative B (No Action): No action would allow for land uses other than wildlife and agriculture to occur. Negative impacts to current air quality in the project area could occur.

Water:

Alternative A (Proposed Action): Water quality on Weaver Slough/Foys Bend project area would be maintained or improved because the conservation easement project requires the landowner adopts a farmland management plan. This plan includes Best Management Practices and other measures to ensure maintenance of land and water resources of the lands under conservation easement.

For the Ringneck Ranch property, the possible restoration of emergent and riparian vegetation along existing or restored wetlands will have a beneficial effect on the quality of surface and ground water. If it requires excavation or other dirt-moving activities, the restoration of wetlands could have a short-term, negative impact on water quality. An environmental assessment of the restoration of any wetlands on the Ringneck property will be undertaken before such activities occur.

Alternative B (No Action): Under the no-action alternative, the quality and quantity of wetland and water resources may not be maintained or enhanced in the future. Subdivision or development of the project lands could result in additional road building, filling/draining of wetlands, and erosion of soils and could have an impact on water quality.

Vegetation:

Alternative A (Proposed Action): For both Weaver Slough/Foys Bend and the Ringneck projects, the proposed alternative would maintain the diversity, quantity, and quality of both upland and riparian/wetland vegetation in the project area. The project would also help maintain the form and function of existing natural wetlands and improve the vegetative condition of these riparian/wetlands in the Ringneck Ranch project area. Native plant species that currently exist would be maintained in both project areas. Cropland areas may be planted to dense nesting cover and food plots.

Alternative B (No Action): Under the no-action alternative, other land uses could occur and would not ensure that current vegetation communities or diversity would be maintained in the future.

Fish and Wildlife:

Alternative A (Proposed Action): Under the proposed alternative, the existing upland and riparian/wetland wildlife habitat values on 685 acres will remain intact and functional as the conservation easement prohibits the alteration of any existing wetlands or riparian areas and most incompatible land uses. This will help ensure the area continues to be used by shorebirds, water birds, waterfowl, semi-aquatic furbearers, upland game birds, raptors, deer, and other wildlife.

Maintenance of water quality and habitat structure is important, particularly at the Foys Bend project because this area is located directly on the Flathead River main stem. Results of a radiotelemetry study conducted by FWP revealed a concentration of fish in the main stem Flathead River associated with the Foys Bend property. Bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout likely occupy these areas to maximize energy conservation and use cover to evade predation or avoid high light intensities. Protection of 1.5 miles of shoreline along the west bank in the Foys Bend area will protect important over-wintering habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, directly contributing to the production of an estimated 25 adult bull trout each year.

For the Ringneck Ranch, the establishment of perennial nesting cover in an area previously committed to agricultural production will positively influence the diversity and abundance of game birds and migratory waterfowl, nongame or watchable wildlife, and small mammals.

The conservation easement on the Foys Bend property will help protect an existing productive bald eagle nest. The maintenance of wetlands and open space in the Ninepipe area could help with peregrine falcons, as the Ringneck Ranch is located near a Tribal hack site that has been occupied for many years. The Ninepipe area is also used by wintering bald eagles and other raptors. The project will also result in improvements in the condition of wetlands and upland vegetation forage and resulting prey for raptors. The Flathead projects would also benefit species of special concern such as common loons that use the Flathead River by Foys Bend and possibly Weaver Slough. The Ringneck Ranch project would help secure and improve habitat for trumpeter swans reintroduced to the Mission Valley in 2002 and 2003.

Alternative B (No Action): No-action alternative could allow future development of these lands. If that occurred, development activities could impact upland and riparian/wetland habitats, disrupt nesting and foraging activities, impact water quality, and negatively affect fish and wildlife values associated with these lands.

HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Noise/Electrical Effects:

Alternative A (Proposed Action): These proposed projects would not have any effect on noise or cause any electrical disturbance.

Alternative B (No Action): No action would mean that current noise or electrical levels could change in the future.

Land Use:

Alternative A (Proposed Action): Current agricultural land uses in the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend project area would be maintained into the future consistent with the terms of the conservation easement. For Ringneck Ranch, agricultural practices to manage and improve wildlife habitat with some opportunity to produce hay or food crops would continue as a land use. In addition, proposed habitat improvements would result in increased waterfowl and upland game bird populations that would lead to greater wildlife and recreational hunter use of the area. This would provide additional economic values for the community. The land would no longer be used for residential purposes. Weaver Slough/Foys Bend project also helps to secure current land use values established by the conservation easements donated by adjoining landowners.

Alternative B (No Action): No action would mean that current land uses could change in the future.

Risk/Health Hazards:

Alternative A (Proposed Action): The proposed action includes the likelihood of occasional use of chemicals for noxious weed control. Whenever chemicals are used, there is some potential for a small-scale spill. To reduce that potential, herbicides would only be applied by a licensed applicator following label instructions and taking all precautions to prevent an accidental discharge.

Alternative B (No Action): No action would probably maintain the status quo associated with risks and health hazards that are typical of most agricultural hay land operations or associated with other land uses that could occur in the future. They could increase or decrease in the future dependent on future land uses.

Community Impact:

Alternative A (Proposed Action): The proposed action will maintain about 685 acres of agricultural and riparian/wetlands. It is part of a larger conservation easement project conserving over 1,000 acres of contiguous agricultural and riparian/wetland habitats in the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend areas. It will also maintain agriculture and wildlife habitat on 200 acres in the Mission Valley.

These projects will help maintain or improve current populations of upland game birds, waterfowl, raptors, songbirds, and semi-aquatic furbearers that now exist in the project areas.

The proposed action will affect location and distribution, but not rate of human population growth. There would be positive effects to tourism, primarily in wildlife viewing and hunting opportunities in the Mission Valley. Open space and undeveloped lands will become more valuable in the future as residential development encompasses more and more rural lands. Any reduction in the vitality of the local economy would be at least partially offset by increases in retail merchandise, food, lodging, and travel supplies associated with wildlife-related recreation. See attached Socio-Economic Assessment for further detail.

Alternative B (No Action): No-action alternative would mean that the current agricultural and recreational nature of the properties could change in the future.

Public Services:

Alternative A (Proposed Action): The proposed action in the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend project area will not affect current public services or property taxes. The conservation easement allows the current agricultural production, irrigation, and other current land uses to continue. The proposed action will not result in any removal of equipment or structures for these lands.

The purchase of the Ringneck property includes a commitment by the state to pay in-lieu-of taxes on the land equal to previous tax values less the value of any of the buildings that might be removed from the property prior to state purchase. The state will not require any new services; the state will pay for irrigation and any other water fees associated with this land.

Alternative B (No Action): No action means that land uses or public service requirements could change in the future on lands in both the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend and Ringneck Ranch project areas. Future landowners may not continue with agriculture, habitat, and irrigation, but may sell, subdivide, or develop the properties.

Aesthetics/Recreation:

Alternative A (Proposed Action): The proposed action in Weaver Slough/Foys Bend project area will maintain the aesthetics, habitat, and open space values associated with extensive river front and sloughs through development restrictions while allowing agricultural land uses to continue. Foys Bend is on the deeper section of the Flathead River and is a popular boating and fishing area. The conservation easement ensures the shoreline will remain undeveloped for its 1.6 miles. Although landowners have decided to retain control of recreational uses of their properties, the conservation easement helps ensure that the potential for recreation will continue in the future.

In the Ringneck Ranch project area, the purchase of an additional 200 acres would increase the quality and quantity of public recreational opportunities by providing more abundant and diverse wildlife populations for hunting, photography, and viewing pursuits. Existing open space available to the public would be maintained.

Alternative B: No action means that the current aesthetic and recreational values of the property could change in the future.

Cultural/Historic Resources:

Alternative A: FWP consulted with the State Historic Preservation Office and the Salish and Kootenai Tribal Councils. According to the state, the proposed project would not cause any additional ground disturbance and therefore would not impact any cultural or historic resources. They also did not find any recorded archaeological or historical data for the proposed project lands. At this time, the cultural committees of the Kootenai and Salish Tribes have not yet responded.

Alternative B (No Action): No action means that current cultural or historic resource values of the property would not necessarily be maintained in the future.

Summary Evaluation of Significance:

Based upon evaluation of potential impacts related to the proposal, a determination has been made that an EIS is not required. The EA is an appropriate level of analysis for the proposed action because: 1) no endangered or threatened plant or animal species will be significantly impacted; 2) there are no long-term or irretrievable impacts to the physical environment; and 3) there are minor impacts to the human environment in the form of increased recreational use, but all can be mitigated to acceptable levels.

List of Agencies Consulted During Preparation of the EA:

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
National Resource Conservation Service
US Fish and Wildlife Service
State Historic Preservation Office

Public Involvement:

The Region and FWP have received considerable support for the proposals during project exploration and development. The Region will make the EA available to interested individuals, groups, and agencies for a 30-day comment period and will hold two public hearings on the proposed conservation projects: Monday, March 15, 2004, at 6:30 p.m. at Ninepipes Lodge (Allentown) south of Ronan, and Tuesday, March 16, 2004, at 7 p.m. in the Somers Middle School, 315 School Addition Road, to discuss the proposal and receive public comment.

Costs:

Purchase price for the 449-acre conservation easement on Weaver Slough would be below estimated market value that was substantiated by a federal standard appraisal undertaken by the landowners. Bargain sale value would be $2,000/acre at Weaver Slough, for a total conservation easement purchase price of $898,000. FWP would provide approximately $106,400 in Montana Migratory Bird Stamp funds, with the balance coming from NAWCA and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection funds. The bargain sale value would be used to match to both the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program and NAWCA grants.

The Foys Bend portion of the proposed conservation easement project on 236 acres would cost $1500/acre for a total of $354,000, also below the appraised conservation easement value. Approximately $73,600 would come from the Montana Migratory Bird Stamp, with the balance coming from NAWCA funds. FWP's total contribution to the conservation easement purchase price on Weaver/Foys Bend is approximately 14.4%.

A federal standard appraisal is underway for the Ringneck Ranch. FWP would propose to purchase the property at fair market value.

Appendices

Appendix A. Estimated Areas of Riparian/Wetlands on both the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend and Ringneck Ranch Properties, 2003.

Property	Pond, Emergent	Riparian/ Wetland	Upland	Total
Weaver Slough	30	143	276	449
Foys Bend	33	70	133	236
Ringneck Ranch-Existing	8	0	192	200
Ringneck Ranch-with restored wetlands	28	0	172	200

Appendix B. BIRD LIST – Owen Sowerwine Natural Area

This cumulative list of 102* species was compiled from annual mid-June field trips and periodic visits by members of the Flathead Audubon Society to the Owen Sowerwine Natural Area, 1992-2003, and a month-long Birdathon effort in 2002. It also includes species recorded during 5 Kalispell Christmas Bird Counts, standardized counts at three points in the area during the 1996 and 1997 breeding seasons, and Bald Eagle waterfowl counts since 1985. The list includes species seen along the Stillwater River from Conrad Drive to Leisure Lane and overhead; those seen adjacent to, but not within the Natural Area are listed in boldface. Evidence of breeding status is as described in Montana Bird Distribution, 5th edition: t = no evidence of breeding; b = circumstantial evidence of breeding (e.g., singing males); and B = hard evidence of breeding (e.g., occupied nest, dependent young).

Double-crested Cormorant	t	Calliope Hummingbird	b	American Robin	B
Great Blue Heron	B	Black-chinned Hummingbird	t	Gray Catbird	B
Turkey Vulture	t	Belted Kingfisher	B	Cedar Waxwing	B
Canada Goose	B	Red-naped Sapsucker	B	Bohemian Waxwing	t
Wood Duck	b	Downy Woodpecker	B	European Starling	t
Mallard	B	Hairy Woodpecker	b	Cassin's Vireo	t
Green-winged Teal	t	Northern Flicker	b	Warbling Vireo	b
Blue-winged Teal	t	Pileated Woodpecker	b	Red-eyed Vireo	b
Cinnamon Teal	t	Western Wood-Pewee	b	Yellow Warbler	b
Northern Pintail	t	Willow Flycatcher	b	Yellow-rumped Warbler	t
Common Goldeneye	B	Least Flycatcher	b	Townsend's Warbler	b
Hooded Merganser	B	Dusky Flycatcher	b	American Redstart	b
Common Merganser	B	Eastern Kingbird	B	Ovenbird	t
Osprey	B	Tree Swallow	B	Northern Waterthrush	b
Bald Eagle	t	Violet-green Swallow	b	MacGillivray's Warbler	b
Sharp-shinned Hawk	t	N. Rough-winged Swallow	B	Common Yellowthroat	b
Cooper's Hawk	t	Bank Swallow	B	Wilson's Warbler	t
Red-tailed Hawk	B	Cliff Swallow	t	Western Tanager	t
American Kestrel	t	Barn Swallow	t	Black-headed Grosbeak	b
Peregrine Falcon	t	Steller's Jay	t	Lazuli Bunting	b
Ring-necked Pheasant	b	Blue Jay	t	Chipping Sparrow	b
Ruffed Grouse	b	Black-billed Magpie	B	Song Sparrow	b
Wild Turkey	B	American Crow	t	Dark-eyed Junco	b
Long-billed Curlew	t	Common Raven	t	Red-winged Blackbird	b
Killdeer	b	Black-capped Chickadee	B	Yellow-headed Blackbird	t
Spotted Sandpiper	b	Mountain Chickadee	b	Brewer's Blackbird	t
Common Snipe	b	Red-breasted Nuthatch	b	Brown-headed Cowbird	b
Ring-billed Gull	t	White-breasted Nuthatch	B	Bullock's Oriole	b
Rock Dove	t	House Wren	b	House Finch	b
Mourning Dove	b	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	b	Red Crossbill	t
Great Horned Owl	B	Golden-crowned Kinglet	t	Pine Siskin	t
Northern Saw-whet Owl	t	Mountain Bluebird	b	American Goldfinch	b
Common Nighthawk	t	Veery	b	Evening Grosbeak	t
Vaux's Swift	B	Swainson's Thrush	b	House Sparrow	t

* This list is incomplete, based as it is on infrequent visits. It is representative of the rich diversity of the site. Compiled by: Daniel Casey, American Bird Conservancy, 33 Second St. East, Kalispell MT 59901. (dcasey@abcbirds.org)

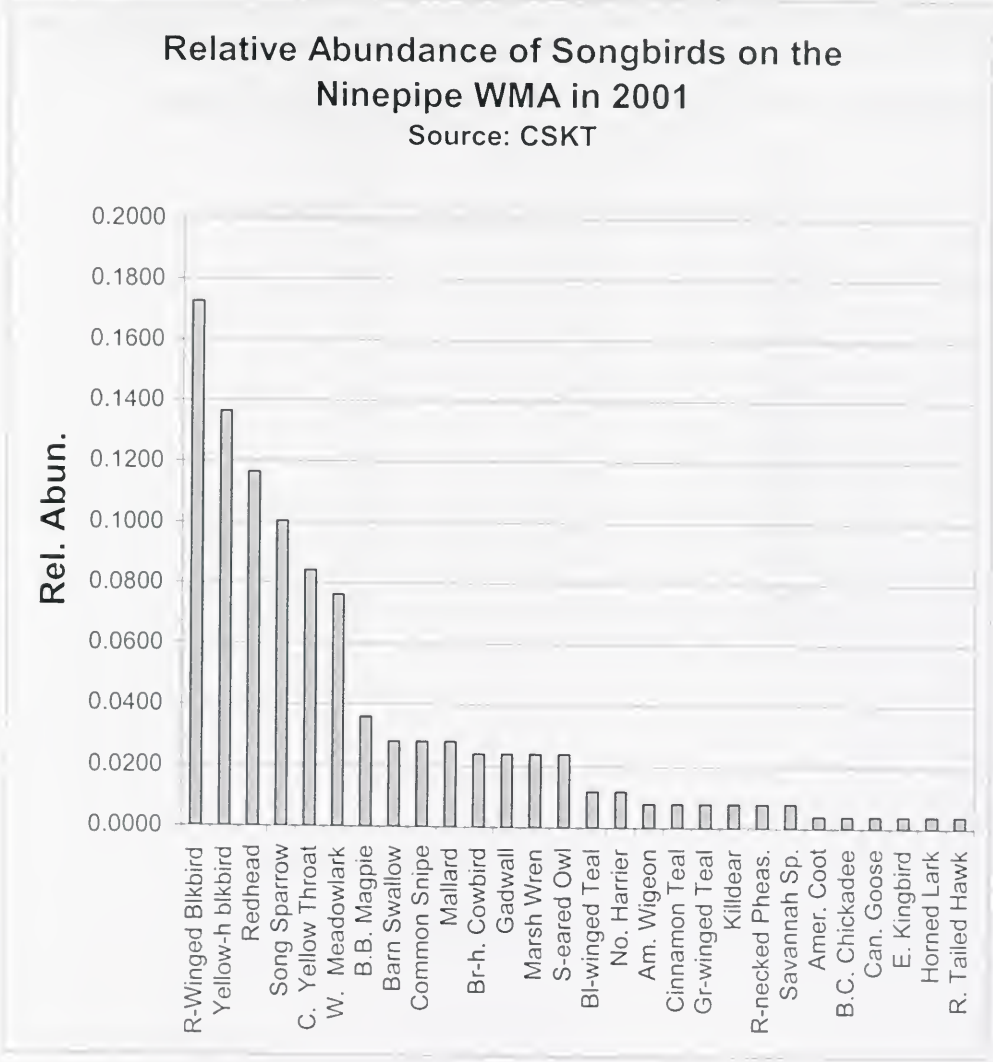
Appendix C. 1999-2001 Ninepipe WMA Area Annual Summer Banding Results (Mission Valley)

Summer 2001 Captures	Ducklings (HY) Male	Ducklings (HY) Female	Adults (AHY) Male	Adults (AHY) Female	Total
Mallard	295	220	302	222	1039
Green-winged Teal	3	1	1	1	6
Cinnamon Teal	2	0	0	0	2
Northern Pintail	5	3	2	4	14
Wood Duck	3	6	13	16	38
Redhead	5	6	2	1	14
Ruddy Duck	0	2	0	1	3

Summer 2000 Captures	Ducklings (HY) Male	Ducklings (HY) Female	Adults (AHY) Male	Adults (AHY) Female	Total
Mallard	627	481	277	201	1586
Green-winged Teal	1	1	0	0	2
American Wigeon	1	2	0	0	3
Blue-winged Teal	10	4	0	1	15
Cinnamon Teal	1	0	0	0	1
Northern Pintail	6	6	34	16	62
Wood Duck	3	1	20	4	28

Summer 1999 Captures	Ducklings (HY) Male	Ducklings (HY) Female	Adults (AHY) Male	Adults (AHY) Female	Total
Mallard	194	183	315	504	1196
Green-winged Teal	0	0	4	0	4
Blue-winged Teal	0	0	0	1	1
Northern Pintail	3	3	4	2	12
Wood Duck	1	0	26	8	35

Appendix D. Relative Abundance of Ninepipe WMA Area Songbirds (prepared by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes) 2001.



Appendix E. Ninepipe WMA Pheasant Hunter Vehicle Count

The table below lists the total number of vehicles (typically 1-4 pheasant hunters per vehicle) parked in parking lots and along the roadsides around the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area during both days of the opening weekend of the pheasant season from 1988 through 2001.

PHEASANT HUNTER VEHICLES ON SURVEY ROUTE AT NINEPIPE WMA

Year	Opening Saturday	Sunday
1988	217	84
1989	192	122
1990	234	99
1991	169	64
1992	203	83
1993	203	76
1994	208	83
1995	149	55
1996	170	79
1997	165	66
1998	167	80
1999	134	49
2000	138	62
2001	135	37
2002	137	52
2003	114	52

RINGNECK RANCH FEE TITLE ACQUISITION
And
WEAVER SLOUGH / FOYS BEND CONSERVATION EASEMENT

SOCIOECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

February 2004

I. INTRODUCTION

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature (MCA 87-1-241 and MCA 87-1-242), authorizes Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to secure an interest in land for the purpose of protecting and enhancing wildlife habitat. These acquisitions can be through fee title, conservation easements, or leasing. In 1989, the Montana Legislature passed House Bill 720 requiring that a socioeconomic assessment be completed when wildlife habitat is acquired using Habitat Montana monies. These assessments evaluate the significant social and economic impacts of the purchase on local governments, employment, schools, and impacts on local businesses.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses FWP's fee title purchase of property currently referred to as Ringneck Ranch and the acquisition of a conservation easement on Weaver Slough/Foys Bend. The report addresses the physical and institutional setting as well as the social and economic impacts associated with proposed acquisitions.

II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

A. Property Descriptions

The Weaver Slough/Foys Bend properties are located in Flathead County southeast of Kalispell. The Ringneck Ranch property is located northeast of Charlo, Montana, in Lake County. Detailed descriptions of these properties are included in the draft Environmental Assessment (EA).

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

The Weaver Slough/Foys Bend lands are used by migratory waterfowl, water birds, shorebirds, songbirds, bald eagles, other raptors, upland game birds, semi-aquatic furbearers, white-tailed deer, and an occasional black or grizzly bear. The major species groups utilizing the Ringneck Ranch include waterfowl, shorebirds, water birds, songbirds, raptors, upland game birds, amphibians and reptiles, and occasional grizzly bears. A list of species is available in the EA.

C. Current Use

Weaver Slough and Foys Bend properties are used primarily for agriculture and wildlife habitat. The Ringneck Ranch property would be used for hunting and upland bird habitat.

D. Alternatives

1) Provide partial funding for perpetual conservation easement held by Flathead Land Trust (Weaver/Foys) and for FWP fee title purchase of the Ringneck property.

Conservation Easement Funding and FWP Fee Title Purchase

The use of state waterfowl stamp funding for the Weaver/Foys portion of this project will provide long-term protection of key riparian/wetland

habitats, agricultural lands, and open space along the main stem Flathead River and Weaver Slough, an old oxbow lake.

Fee title purchase of the Ringneck Ranch property will provide long-term protection for the wetlands this prairie pothole area supports, as well as conservation and enhancement of the extremely productive upland bird/waterfowl habitat and wildlife that this land sustains. In addition, public recreational opportunities, including hunting, bird watching, and educational trips, will be enhanced.

No Purchase Alternative

This alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what the current owners decide to do with the property if FWP does not contribute to the purchase of the conservation easement or purchase of the Ringneck Ranch land in fee. Division of the property by one of the owners has been mentioned.

Habitat maintenance and public access may or may not continue depending on who purchases the property. The economic impacts associated with this alternative have not been estimated.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

The funding for the conservation easement helps willing farmers complete a large contiguous conservation project on all of Weaver Slough as well as Foys Bend. The project will ensure that agricultural land uses will continue into the future and that riparian/wetlands will remain intact. State funding helps leverage available federal wetland and farmland funds.

The fee title purchase will provide long-term protection of important wildlife habitat, help maintain the integrity of the adjacent Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area (WMA), and provide for public access for hunting and other recreational opportunities. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of the fee title purchase from two basic accounting stances: financial and local area impacts.

Financial impacts address the cost of the fee title purchase to FWP and discuss the impacts on tax revenues to local government agencies including school districts.

Expenditure data associated with the use of the property provides information for analyzing the impacts these expenditures may have on local businesses (i.e., income and employment).

A. Financial Impacts

The financial impacts to FWP are related to the fee title purchase and maintenance/management costs of the Ringneck Ranch property and the acquisition of a conservation easement on the Weaver Slough/Foys Bend properties.

Annual maintenance/management costs are estimated to be about $2,000/acre and could be incorporated into FWP's WMA program.

The Weaver Slough/Foys Bend easement will cost the Department $180,000 for their portion of the acquisition (Weaver Slough - $106,400 and Foys Bend - $73,600). Monitoring costs associated with these properties will be the primary responsibility of the private conservation organization involved in the project.

The financial impacts to local governments when FWP acquires fee title to land are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the acquisition. There will be no significant changes in tax revenues to local governments, including schools, due to the purchase of the Ringneck Ranch property. Taxes on this property were $5,706.86 in 2002. Montana Code 87-1-603 states, "the treasurer of each county in which the department owns any land shall describe the land, state the number of acres in each parcel, and request the drawing of a warrant to the county in a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen."

The Weaver Slough/Foys Bend conservation easement will not change the type or level of use on these two parcels. Consequently the assessments made for tax purposes on these parcels will not change, resulting in no change to the tax revenue collected by Flathead County. See MCA 76-6-208 for details.

B. Economic Impacts

The fee title purchase will not significantly affect the agricultural activities on the Ringneck Ranch property. FWP annually develops share-cropping arrangements on the hay land and acreage where grain is planted for food plots for waterfowl and upland birds at Ninepipe WMA. Consequently, there will not be any significant financial impacts to local businesses associated with the ranching/farming activities in the long term.

The fencing, weed control, and irrigation work will provide positive financial impacts to local businesses supplying the materials for these projects.

Currently, the Ninepipe WMA provides about 3,000 hunter days per year. It is anticipated that the acquisition will improve the quality of the hunting experience by spreading these hunters over a larger area. In addition, nonhunting use such as wildlife viewing is expected to provide another 100-200 days of additional use. This activity will have a positive economic impact to the local business community.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The Ringneck Ranch fee title purchase will provide long-term protection for wildlife habitat, maintain the agricultural integrity of the land, ensure public access for hunting and other recreational/educational opportunities, and help ensure the overall integrity of Ninepipe WMA.

The fee title purchase of this property by FWP will not cause a reduction in tax revenues from their current levels to Lake County, Montana.

Agricultural activities will continue on the WMA. Hunting and other recreational activities will continue at their present levels and in some cases increase. The financial impacts of this acquisition to local businesses will be neutral to positive in both the short term and long run.

The Weaver Slough/Foys Bend conservation easement maintains the private ownership of these lands, while protecting the wildlife values these parcels provide, and also enhances the overall integrity of the lands currently protected in these area.

Tax revenues to Flathead County will not decline due to the acquisition. Impacts to local business will be neutral since the type and use of the property will not change.

NINEPIPE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

Ringneck Ranch Addition Management Plan

February 2004

The 200-acre Ringneck Ranch property will be incorporated into the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area and managed in accordance with this interim plan, which will then be incorporated into the final Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area Management Plan currently being developed. The goal of FWP's Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area plan is to conserve, maintain, and enhance wildlife habitat, in particular for waterfowl and upland game birds as well as other resident and migratory species, while also providing year-round, wildlife-related recreational opportunities.

Objectives

Specific objectives will be to:

1. provide and protect habitat for a diversity of wildlife species;
2. provide attractive and secure nesting conditions for waterfowl and upland game birds;
3. provide adequate food resources on-site for wildlife;
4. optimize overwinter survival of pheasants;
5. maintain and enhance soil productivity and water quality; and
6. provide year-round public access for compatible recreational opportunities.

Development and Management

The property will be posted with Wildlife Management Area signs. Cross fences and boundary fences separating the Ringneck property from current FWP property will be removed. At least two parking areas will be constructed along the bordering roads to allow access for hunters. Seasonal closures would be considered as an option, as needed, during the waterfowl-nesting season.

Noxious weed infestations will be mapped and an integrated pest management program will be implemented to comply with state and county regulations. At the present time, weeds are not considered a major problem on this property. The weed management plan will include an appropriate mix of agricultural practices, mowing and pulling, herbicide applications, and biological weed control where agents are available.

The approximately 70 acres of farmland that are currently idle (fallow) will be seeded about 50/50 to cereal grain for food plots and perennial herbaceous plants for nesting and hiding cover in 2004. Eventually, approximately six 5-to-10-acre cereal grain plots will be dispersed on the land to provide a food supply for pheasants, migratory waterfowl, and other wildlife. These plots will be cropped and fallowed in alternate years to aid in weed management. Food plots will be developed and maintained by project personnel at first, but may be incorporated into existing sharecropper agreements if feasible. Periodically, fallow fields will be planted with a green manure crop to enhance soil productivity. Leguminous companion crops (peas, alfalfa, and sweet clover) will be

planted with cereal grains in some years to increase vegetative diversity and enrich soils.

FWP will contract or cooperate with an agency or entity to delineate and develop a restoration plan for all wetlands on the property. Any restoration work will be detailed in a subsequent draft EA for public review.

A significant portion of the upland agricultural cropland will be converted to a grass/alfalfa hay land to provide dense nesting cover. Once established, about 40 acres of hay will be harvested each year after the peak nesting season. This will improve condition of nesting cover by removing decadent grasses, maintain vigor of alfalfa, and minimize invasion of noxious weeds.

The water delivery system will be maintained in a fashion that will allow periodic refilling of the existing wetlands. Ditches will be pulled every few years as needed to allow free water flow. Ditch banks will be treated to prevent the establishment and spread of noxious weed communities. All water bills will by paid by FWP.